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PHASES OF FURNISHING IN ENGLISH HOMES.—I. THE "QUAINT."

BY R. DAVIS BENN.



TO convey an idea of the developments of taste in furnishing matters which have come about in England during the last fifteen or twenty years is no easy task, and it grows more difficult as time goes on. The days when people were content to put up with the same old patterns, served up year after year, have gone, never to return, and the old Athenian yearning for some new thing has so taken possession of the public that those who make it their business to cater for the beauti-

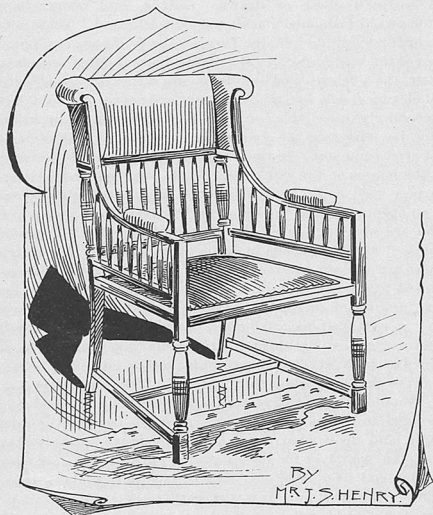


FIG. 1—ARMCHAIR.

fy of the home are compelled to keep their faculties at a high tension in the constant production of novelties. Whether this persistent straining after freshness is altogether to be commended, it is not my intention to discuss at this juncture, for the object of these articles is to attempt to convey an idea of matters as they really are, rather than to enter into any speculations as to what they might or should be. Anticipating the question, "Is your present work inferior, or superior,

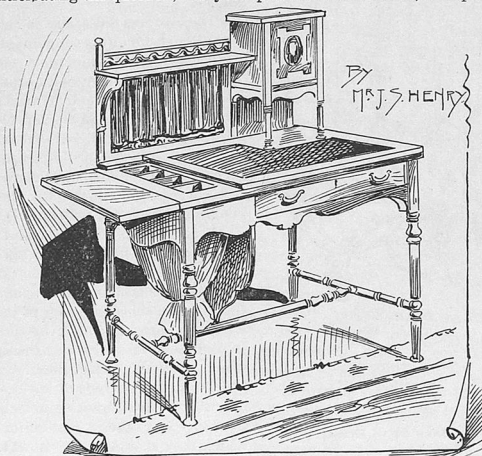


FIG. 2—A WRITING WORK TABLE.

to that produced in the 'good old days'?" it may be well to say at once that, in my opinion, English homes have never before been so admirably catered for by our national furnishers.

A QUAIN DRESSING TABLE.

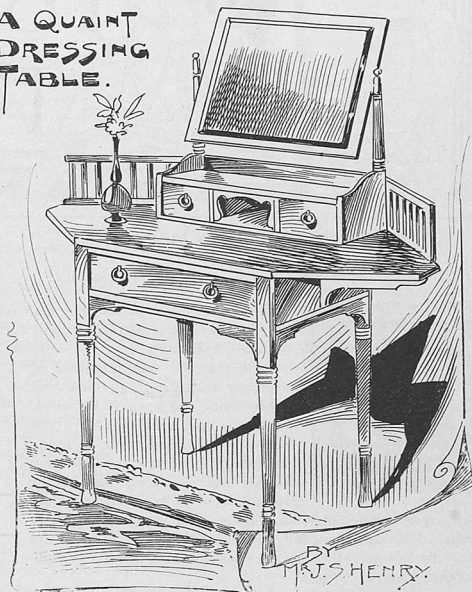


FIG. 3—DRESSING-TABLE.

It would, of course, be absurd to deny the fact that a vast amount of dreadful rubbish is made and sold constantly by many firms. But, on the other hand, the range and variety of excellent work, to which no exception can be taken, either on the score of design or construction, is steadily increasing, and it is with this latter class that I shall deal. It is to be feared that the hack phrase "cheap and nasty" has

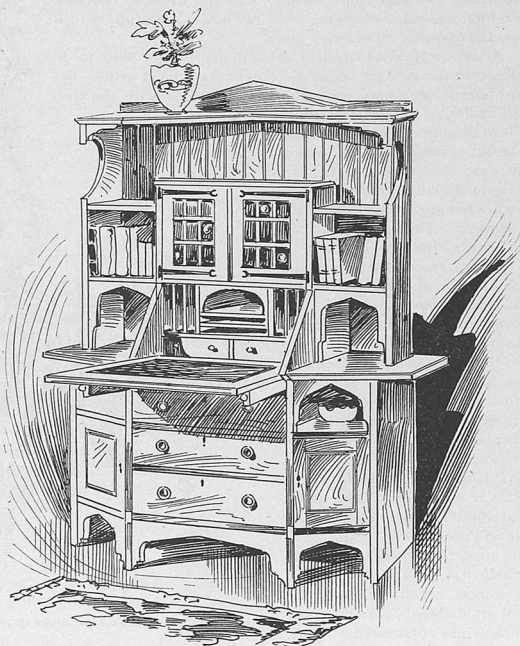


FIG. 4—A SECRETAIRE BOOKCASE.

not infrequently given rise, in the minds of many people, to the serious misconception that what is 'nice' must necessarily be 'dear.'

That this is not the case our furnisHERs are effectually proving by producing goods which, while being most tasteful and effective, and of

study is by no means devoid of interest. Although in these "Quaint" goods, as I shall style them, hardwoods—principally mahogany, oak and walnut—are freely employed, stained effects predominate; dark transparent greens, reds and blues being the favorite colors. These

transparent stains are applied so that the grain of the wood is brought out to the best possible advantage, and articles so treated—embellished with gilt-leaded stained glass, brass and copper fittings, choice curtains of delicate silk, paintings, carefully selected encaustic tiles, and other decorative adjuncts, possess a wealth of color and novel charm which are quite unique. It has been urged that cabinet work of the class under consideration is effeminate, and, in some cases, that contention is just. But even if it is, the fact that the fair sex have so powerful an influence on the furnishing and decoration of our houses, will induce the commercially-minded to consider their effeminacy rather as an advantage than otherwise.

In the choice of examples with which to illustrate these remarks, I

have been courteously permitted by Mr. J. S. Henry, of Old Street, London—a wholesale manufacturer and leading pioneer in this class of work—to reproduce a selection of his latest novelties, which may be considered as up-to-date and thoroughly representative in every way.

Fig. 1 is an arm chair quite in keeping with most recent traditions.

Articles of furniture answering a dual purpose become more in demand every day, and the writing work table, Fig. 2, will indicate how the requirements of those in search of such are being studied. This is made in mahogany, with an amber silk curtain at the back, and a bag of the same material suspended beneath the work—well, the result, though simple, being decidedly effective.

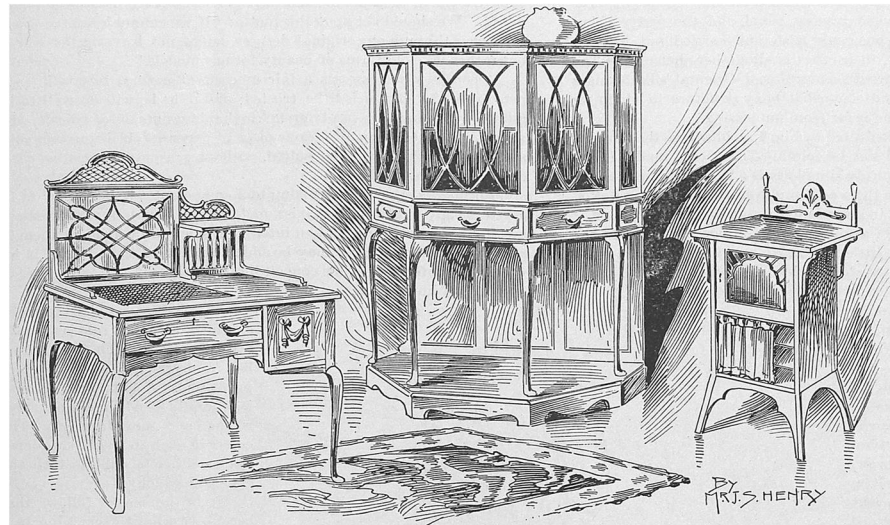


FIG. 5—WRITING TABLE, CHINA CABINET AND MUSIC CABINET.

unimpeachable construction, come out at a price at which our forefathers would have deemed it impossible to make them.

There is a decided tendency in contemporary English cabinet work to forsake old traditions, and to strike out into "fresh fields and pastures new." It must not be inferred that we are entirely deserting old styles, for that is not the case. The Elizabethan and Jacobean still play their part; the Louis Quatorze, Louis Quinze and Louis Seize continue to enjoy their share of popularity, and the creations of Chippendale, Heppelwhite and Sheraton are daily reproduced, with both artistic and commercial success. But these have now to sustain the rivalry of a description of furniture, which, as far as style is concerned, is "neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring," but which, for all that, has many most important points to recommend it. Quaintness is the leading characteristic of this new mode, and in designing new patterns on its lines, the artist is neither bound down by the proportions of the classic orders, nor by any other restrictions, except those inseparably associated with the materials in which his fancies are to be carried out. If he desire to introduce an extra shelf or row of spindles, to knock off a corner or put one on, to work in an engraving, painting, dainty curtain or stained glass panel, there is no one to say him nay, and he is permitted to let his fancy have full play, so far as material will allow. And full advantage is being taken of the opportunity, so much so that one is inclined to fear that, in unskillful hands, this quaintness may develop into absurdity (which it does).

Just as Chippendale freed our furniture from the comparative stiffness of the Jacobean, and permitted his genius to carry him to absurd lengths in an opposite direction, perpetrating atrocities which almost make ones blood run cold, there is a likelihood of our abusing this freedom, unless originality of thought be tempered by discretion and judgment. But, kept within bounds, the development is an interesting and commendable one, whose

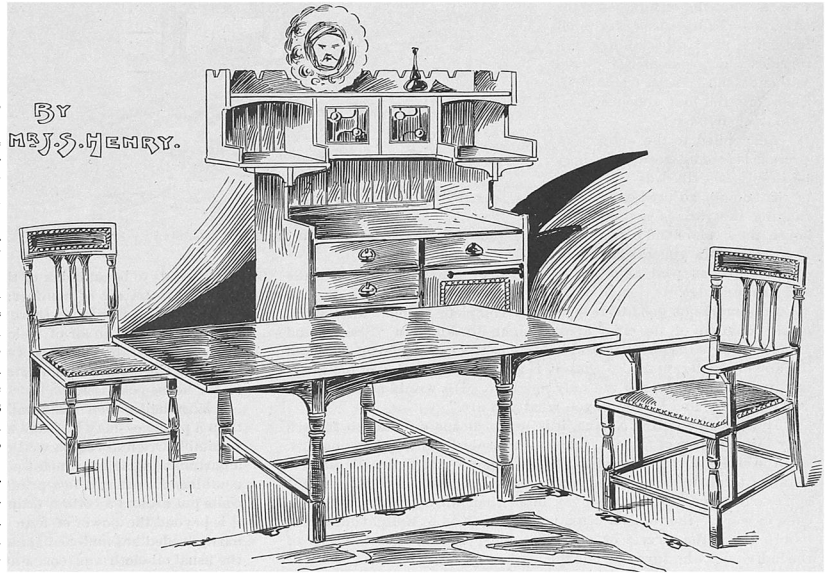


FIG. 6—REMBRANDT DINING ROOM EFFECTS.

Fig. 8 shows the dressing table of a quaint stained green bedroom suite, the wardrobe and washstand of which are made upon similar lines, while Fig. 4, a *secrétaire*-bookcase in oak, is as utilitarian as it is

quaint, for, in this case, utility is in no way sacrificed to effect, a fault far too often committed nowadays.

The articles in Fig. 5 are founded on more ordinary motives, but they are, none the less, on fresh and sprightly lines, and characterized by features which cannot but appeal to cultivated tastes. The lady's writing table, with its mirror-backed tracery panel, and the pretty china cabinet, are as restrained as one could wish, and carried out in rich, dark mahogany; as they are, their effect is altogether charming. The music cabinet, stained green, with a curtain of Oriental silk, forms a variation from the square and somewhat boxy structure to which we have become accustomed, and is far from unpleasing.

A better study than is constituted by Fig. 6, to illustrate the growing tendency referred to, could not be found. The "Rembrandt" is the name given to this set, and sturdy simplicity is a leading characteristic of the whole. Fumed oak is the wood employed in the interpretation of this design, as being most in accordance with the spirit in which it has been devised. The chairs are covered in brown leather, and the cupboard door of the curious little sideboard has a panel of the same material, studded with large-headed bright nails, which is quite a fresh idea and helps to give consistency to the complete scheme.

Many more studies of a similar character might be illustrated, but those accompanying these cursory remarks will, I hope, serve to give some idea of the trend of English taste of to-day. With these examples in view one may surely contend that the conservatism which has sometimes been thrown in our teeth as a taunt is giving way to broader views, at all events so far as furniture is concerned, a contention which I shall endeavor to support further in future articles.

TASTE AND ECONOMY IN DECORATION AND FURNITURE.

BY E. KNIGHT.

THESE things are so much a matter of taste," is a very common remark; and so they are; but the result must show either good or bad taste; for good taste, like most other things, has its rules which cannot be ignored without the result suffering. Therefore, the first conclusion is: What is good taste?

As applied to the subject at present before us, good taste may be briefly described as the power of balancing, adjusting and arranging the various articles in a house, their colors and patterns, so as to produce a general harmony of the whole, as well as a certain fitness of things to their purpose and surroundings.

No remarks on good taste would be complete without an allusion to the opinion of its chief apostle, John Ruskin. In "Sesame and Lilies," he says that taste in architecture is the expression of national life and character, and also that it is a part and an index of morality; nay, more—good taste is the only morality. His words are, "Tell me what you like, and I will tell you what you are."

Thus, upon entering a room, it is by no means difficult to form a very fair estimate of the character of its owner from the surroundings.

The size and character of the house and the position and internal detail of the individual rooms very often suggest special treatment. It is, of course, impossible to convey more than an approximation of a color in words—the result is often made or marred by a slight difference in a tint, and the success or otherwise must depend upon the taste of the individual who superintends the work.

However proud we may justly be of the advances made by science and the mechanical arts in this century, we cannot but confess with regret that in many matters of taste we have fallen sadly behind the previous one.

It would appear by looking at the buildings erected in present times, that all good combinations of form have been previously exhausted. The only good results which we see are the successful reproductions of bygone styles; or where, if they have not been lavishly copied, some of their details and their general feeling have been reproduced. We should act upon this motto: "If we cannot leave the world the richer through our original designs, let us not leave it the worse, but rather take old forms of beauty for our models."

A person who possesses a fair amount of natural taste will soon perceive if the adviser is to be trusted; and if he is, will do well to be guided by his opinion, in preference to that of a number of friends, who will praise or condemn any single piece of paper or fabric upon the suitability of which they are consulted, without grasping the general effect of the room as a whole.

Nothing is more disheartening to a competent salesman than to be asked his advice and to have it ignored. To such a salesman's suggestions are often of great value, and an intelligent salesman will adopt them in preference to his own. It may be added, that a conceited man is invariably ill-informed, as his conceit limits his resources for increasing his stock of knowledge.

If the best results are to be obtained, a golden rule is to have every detail in each room settled before anything is put in hand or purchased. A hall, for instance, is generally seen from the principal rooms, and they from it. The colors in each should be so ordered that neither should disturb the general harmony.

It by no means follows that because we have everything in a room in good taste we must necessarily spend more money than we otherwise should do. Some of the very best effects are obtained by very simple means. But for this we must not be handicapped with incongruous pieces of furniture, or with carpets and curtains of violent colors, which, though of interest and value, would be out of harmony with their other surroundings.

The following remarks do not profess to be a complete treatise on the theory of color and form, but are merely hints and suggestions for the treatment of the principal rooms, the result of a very considerable and varied experience.

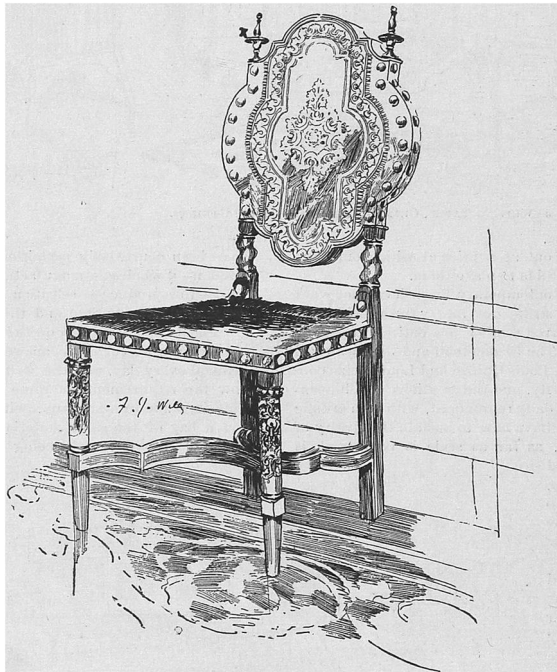
THE HALL.

The importance of this part of the house is again becoming recognized, and the hall is regaining the position it occupied prior to the early part of the present century.

It tends to be an index of the whole house; and it should, however small, have an air of comfort; and in city houses an air of warmth also. Articles should be there displayed to invite inspection and to convey generally an air of welcome. In large houses, especially those in the country, the hall makes one of the pleasantest lounges. There is an air of freedom in a comfortably furnished hall, which no other part of the house possesses.

Most halls, even the smallest—indeed, when they are little more than a passage—may be made to look cosy. A dark-stained floor, with a suitable Oriental rug; a well-covered wall paper, with the addition of a curtain at some convenient point; a small table and umbrella stand combined; a chair; a few prints on the walls; and a rail for hats and coats put around a corner, or in a cupboard out of sight if possible (for it is beyond the power of man to give any artistic effect to the ordinarily loaded hat-and-coat-stand), will be found a great advance upon the usual oil-cloth and cocoa-nut mat, and the cheerless looking varnished marble paper, which still obtain in many of the smaller houses.

Where space permits, the addition of a few pieces of furniture, such as a tall clock, an oak buffet, a china cabinet or bookcase, a few chairs, etc., should be introduced. In the larger halls, with galleries



SPANISH CHAIR IN EMBOSSED LEATHER. DESIGNED BY E. J. WILEY.